

ARGUING FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?

The Jewish Book Week audience was surprised, and some were disappointed, that the author of a book called *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* was an atheist. AGI ERDOS meets **REBECCA GOLDSTEIN** and finds out how she reached the unusual position of an atheist who respects religion

I was intrigued by the title of Rebecca Goldstein's new novel; not because I've been desperate to prove that God exists – in fact, I've always wondered why anyone would want to do that – but because it sounded so unusual for a work of fiction. Thankfully, most of the book is not about trying to prove anything, but rather it is a glimpse into American high academia where students idolize half-lunatic professors, where people 'fang' their colleagues at conferences to secure a name for themselves, and where universities collect big-shot academics like children do baseball cards. One of the author's main points is that irrationality is deeply embedded in the human character: even those who claim to be the most cold-headed rationalists, waving the banner of objectivity, will often be driven by emotions and attachments that are far from sensible.

I meet Rebecca Goldstein in one of London's trendy hotels and, as introductions are made, I get the impression yet again, having also seen her at Book Week, that she's so unlike a philosopher. She is approachable with a simple and understated style, but I do realise very soon that she speaks with a lot of wisdom. There is an air of calmness about her that makes me think, this woman has thought her life through and is happy with where she is now. I talk to her about living with and without religion, her role model Spinoza, and the ideas that underlie her latest book.

Rebecca grew up in an Orthodox family and even though she already realised at a young age that she could not believe in a transcendent God, she held on to her Orthodox lifestyle well into her adult years. "It was not easy for me to just leave it all behind, even though I didn't believe in it. Non-belief doesn't necessarily make you want to leave the community. I stayed because of my personal relationships, because of people who would have been heartbroken if they couldn't eat at my house, or if my children weren't brought up to be knowledgeable."

Discovering philosophy (first Plato and Spinoza) was a major revelation and a life-changing experience. "I went to a very religious school – which I disliked tremendously – and I would sneak books in all the time. I wasn't a bad girl but I guess I



wanted to outrage my teachers, though not in an openly confrontational way. I remember reading *The Death of God* behind my Hebrew Bible, hoping that my teacher would catch me out so I could engage her. But she was wise enough not to notice." In a family where everyone was extremely Orthodox, she didn't feel she could discuss her doubts with her parents. "My mum once said to me, 'Much smarter people than you have had the same thoughts and still stayed religious.' This attitude, her suggesting 'who are you to challenge the system?', made me decide not to push the matter again."

Goldstein is not at all observant today but she only gave up Jewish practice after her parents died. She followed Spinoza in this, she tells me. "When I first learnt about Spinoza, I decided he was going to be my model. At that point I didn't understand much of what he was saying, but on an emotional level I responded to

him. He waited until his parents died before he came out with his heretical ideas, and that was what I did, too. There was no way I was going to rebel against my parents' will and break their hearts."

Goldstein believes that religiosity has a lot more to it than mere belief in God. It is also about community, identity, loyalty, bonding, and our existential fears. So if it has so much to offer even for a non-believer, what was it that ultimately made her give it up? "The part that I didn't like about the religious lifestyle was that in my community there was a sense of defensiveness towards the outside world. The attitude was that we're in here and the world's out there, and though we can negotiate that world, we're not a part of it, it's not our world. That didn't sit well with me. To me it's more fulfilling to identify myself with the world at large. What I ultimately rejected was one's self-identification being rooted in the group's identity. It was, of course, in many ways a great loss and I often feel bereft but I get a lot out of this, too. And I completely understand making the other decision and staying; in fact, I did that for a long time."

But if there is no God, where do those overwhelming or even ecstatic experiences that people often have come from? That inexplicable sense of gratitude when we are happy and life is good, or the awe one feels at the grandeur of the world? "These experiences are of course very real and I think the most natural expression to give to

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them is indeed the religious expression. That's the language that comes, it's hard to resist that – and that's what Spinoza means when he talks about an "intellectual love of God". He agrees that we can feel in awe in the face of the complexity and grandeur of existence – and grateful to be a part of it – and experience this ontological wonder. But he believes you can give it a non-theistic expression, and that's what he tries to do."

For an atheist, Rebecca Goldstein is very empathetic and accepting towards religion. Where does she think the impatience of most well-known atheist authors come from? "They don't understand what the religious experience feels like, they don't understand the complexity. They think it all boils down to showing the proofs and accepting them, like in mathematics. They don't realise that there's a lot more to religiosity than proving or disproving the existence of God. "We've given you the proofs, what more do you need – why can't we convert you?" they say impatiently. And of course they tend to identify religion with its most vicious, fundamentalist and violent eruptions. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, they're my friends, but for them I'm way too

tolerant towards religion and I haven't got the anger they have. So one of the things I wanted to do with my new novel was to make it a post-anger book: to demonstrate that you could be an atheist and still be accepting and understanding."

Where does she see the place of religion in an ideal world? "As a philosopher, my ideal would be for everybody to be Spinozas. For people to take the religious experiences they have and direct them towards existence itself and the here and now, and to identify with the world at large, not little groups. But as a novelist I wouldn't like that. I like the particular stories, the individual narratives and mythologies. I don't think our stories would be as good if we all became Spinozas. And of course in my ideal world, if there is religion, it has to be held with the possibility of doubt. Where people would say, 'This is how I want to live, since one has to live one way, and it's good for me to live in this community and within this narrative, but I can well imagine having made another choice.' A pluralism, a place for many different stories, with the recognition that there are also other stories – that would be my ideal."

36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD – A WORK OF FICTION

REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

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